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# **Representations of Madness in Indo-Caribbean Literature**

by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis presents a critical reading of selected Indo-Caribbean prose and poetry and explores their shared concern with issues of madness and insanity. Before approaching literary texts, however, the thesis investigates the colonial treatment of mental illness in Trinidad and British Guiana in order to establish a pragmatic link between the East Indians' experience of mental illness during indentureship and its later emergence in literature. The study of the development of local colonial psychiatry is based on the examination of original sources, including relevant Parliamentary Papers and previously unexamined material. A critical reading of Edward Jenkins's writings provides the link between history and literature, whilst contemporary theories on the construction of the collective imaginary help to sustain the argument of a transference of the trope of madness from facts to fiction, from reality to imagination.

This project contributes both to the growing field of Indo-Caribbean literary criticism and to the embryonic area of the history of mental health in the Caribbean. Concentrating on the relation between the social history of medicine and literary imagination it suggests a new approach to Indo-Caribbean literature based on the close relationship between health and culture.

"It turns out that the darkness at the heart of the colonial experience may be a certain history of madness"

(Clingman 231).

## INTRODUCTION

The term Indo-Caribbean is a hybrid produced by British colonial experimentations in human labour and embedded with ongoing inner tensions between its heterogeneous constituents.<sup>1</sup> Indians were first brought to the Caribbean after the abolition of slavery as a supply of cheap labour to be employed mainly on sugar plantations. Although their history of slavery has not yet received the same level of coverage and recognition given to that of their African predecessors, the Indians introduced to the region as indentured servants lived a similar experience of uprooting and displacement and were also subject to forms of abuse and oppression. Indeed, the first generations of Indentureds went to occupy the barracks formerly inhabited by African slaves and to toil for the same masters accustomed to managing their workforce by the use of the whip.

The psychological implications of this ordeal were severe; accounts of suicide, wife murder and derangement crowd historical and literary sources, testifying to a diffused emotional and mental malaise amongst early East Indian communities. At the same time, a subtle politicised spectrum informs the construal of madness in the colonial context; the evaluation of official records often suggests that colonial psychiatry acted mainly as a regulating force, contributing to a demagoguery of mental insanity aimed at containing and reforming unruly behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> The term hybrid is used here to convey the intrinsic plurality of the "new transcultural forms [created] within the contact zone produced by colonisation" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 118).

Taking into account this critical dualism, this project combines the investigation of new sources in the history of colonial medicine with the reading of colonial and post-colonial literature in order to illustrate the importance of madness as part of the Indentureds' experience and to map out its cross-generational passage into the collective memory and imaginary of Indo-Caribbean people.<sup>2</sup> While the exegesis of historical records occupies comparatively little space in the body of the present study, the factual and ideological premises that it helps to establish are fundamental to my subsequent interrogation of the role of racial, sexual, political and social pressures in the etiology of madness in Indo-Caribbean literature. Since its early days, this literature has recorded a widespread concern with the mind's response to environmental stressors and has become a privileged site for the investigation and understanding of psychological conflicts. In some cases, the literary representation of madness mirrors the author's inner displacement and anxieties, or even contributes to a process of self-therapy; in others, the symbolism of madness is adopted to convey a wider sense of historical or existential fragmentation that extends beyond individual experience. Altogether, the works discussed in this project encompass the polysemy of this theme as developed and portrayed in Indo-Caribbean literature.<sup>3</sup>

### **Towards a historiography of colonial psychiatry in the Caribbean**

Scholars have often investigated the relationship between madness and colonialism; in particular, much attention has been paid to the psychological disorders affecting

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this work the term madness and its numerous cognates are used interchangeably and in a very broad sense to include severe mental illness, emotional breakdowns, temporary fits of insanity, derangement, frenzy, despair, or any other manifestation that is usually identified as a departure from the real and the rational.

<sup>3</sup> Emigration to more prosperous countries during the last fifty years has been crucial to the understanding of Indo-Caribbean identity and to its representation. Almost all the writers discussed in this thesis have made their residence abroad for economic, social or political reasons and have transferred into their art experiences of cultural and physical displacement.



colonized people. Richard Keller traces the development of this literature back to the intersection of two main historiographical strains initiated by the seminal works of Michel Foucault and Edward Said (*Madness and Colonialism* 295-296).<sup>4</sup> As Keller suggests, by linking Western psycho-sciences to wider strategies of social power and control, Foucault has opened the way for a new approach to the history of psychiatry; at the same time, Said's redefinition of "the 'Orient' [as] a topos of the Western academic imagination" has catalyzed scholarly concerns about the connection between knowledge, in its various forms and expressions, and colonial power (Keller, *M&C* 295-296). It is within this framework, suggests Keller, that the strong relationship between colonial medicine and power, as described by Franz Fanon in *A Dying Colonialism* (1959), has become the focus of new scholarly research, which has "elucidated the importance of medical knowledge for colonial conquest" (*M&C* 296). Moving beyond Fanon's understanding of colonialism as the force directly responsible for the emergence of psychopathologies, recent scholarship has drawn mainly on Freudian theories to expose the subtle mechanisms of domination employed by colonial psychology. Whilst in the arena of post-colonial studies the problematic universalism of psychoanalysis has often caused its dismissal, there are several critics in the field who have adopted it as a relevant, though complex, framework of analysis.<sup>5</sup> This work takes on board Keller's argument that "[a]lthough laying a psychoanalytic grid over historical evidence can be informative, this methodology often proves limiting, and reveals far less about the psychology of the

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<sup>4</sup> Keller refers specifically to Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Gallimard: Paris, 1972 [1961]) and to Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (Routledge: New York, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> In *Dark Continents* Ranjana Khanna argues that psychoanalysis sprang from the same episteme as colonialism and was contaminated with the same racism and ethnocentricity; the subject of psychoanalysis, maintains Khanna, is the Western Man, while women and black men are the Dark Continent, the unknowable and invisible Other. It is in virtue of its essentially colonial background, Khanna suggests, that psychoanalysis constitutes an important reading practice "crucial for the understanding of postcoloniality and decolonization" (10).

colonial predicament than it obscures” (*M&C* 296-297). On the other hand, Keller suggests, “[s]cholarship on colonial psychiatry opens a new window into this important historical problem, and offers significant if ambiguous evidence about ‘colonial psychology’” (*M&C* 298). It is therefore to the historiography of colonial psychiatry that I first turn my attention in order to gain a closer understanding of this practice and of the ways in which the concepts of normality and deviance, reason and insanity, were constructed and used within the colonial context.

Whilst the study of twentieth century British and French psychiatry in Africa has produced a wide-ranging literature that investigates psychological disorders in relation to colonial occupation, scholarship on nineteenth century colonial psychiatry in other parts of the British Empire is still very limited.<sup>6</sup> India seems to have monopolised the attention of the main scholars in the field. In *Mad Tales from the Raj* (1991) the psychologist and historian Waltraud Ernst presents the most accurate study to date of British colonial psychiatry in India; more specifically, her work is concerned with the treatment of the European ‘insane’ in colonial India and demonstrates the collusion between Western medical psychology and British colonial ideology and practice based on racial and social control.<sup>7</sup> Yet, if one critique can be raised against Ernst it is that by limiting the scope of her research to the European ‘insane’ she overlooks the dynamics of the relationship between coloniser and

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<sup>6</sup> For the role of colonial psychiatry in Africa see, among others, Jock McCulloch *Colonial Psychiatry and 'the African mind'*; Richard C. Keller, *Colonial Madness: Psychiatry in French North Africa*; Jean-Michel Bégué, “French Psychiatry in Algeria (1830-1962): from Colonial to Transcultural”; Jonathan Sadowsky, “Psychiatry and Colonial Ideology in Nigeria”, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*; Lynette A. Jackson, *Surfacing Up: Psychiatry and Social Order in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1908-1968*. Another important collection that examines the impact of colonialism on mental health in different parts of the world, including India, Australia, parts of Africa, Lithuania, Wales, and Ireland is *Colonialism and Psychiatry*, edited by Dinesh Bhugra and Roland Littlewood.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst has produced a wide range of publications on psychiatry in British India. Her articles include “Colonial Lunacy Policies and the Madras Lunatic Asylum in the Early Nineteenth Century” (2001); “Colonial Psychiatry, Magic and Religion. The Case of Mesmerism in British India” (2004); “Idioms of Madness and Colonial Boundaries: the Case of the European and 'Native' Mentally Ill in Early Nineteenth-century British India” (1997); “Out of Sight and Out of Mind: Insanity in Early Nineteenth Century British India” (1999).

colonised which define the very social context of her study. James H. Mills, on the other hand, makes colonial power relationships the hallmark of his fascinating, though not always historically detailed, study entitled *Madness, Cannabis and Colonialism* (2000). Mills looks at India's natives-only lunatic asylums between 1857 and 1900 and suggests that colonial asylums, which were originally created to impose control over dangerous Indians and to remove "the troublesome and the unproductive" (179), in actual fact, became grounds for resistance to alien power and rule.<sup>8</sup> Although the evidence and sources they analyse are exclusively related to India, these works suggest useful methodological frameworks for the investigation of colonial psychiatry in other corners of the British Empire.

Studies on early psychiatric practice in the English-speaking Caribbean have been thus far very exiguous.<sup>9</sup> M.H. Beaubrun et al. produced the first assessment of the institutionalization of mental illness in the region in 1976. While presenting a well-researched overview of the birth of the asylum, the treatment of insanity, and relevant legislation across the West Indian islands, the authors of this study fail to include Guyana thus overlooking a very important segment of the history of colonial mental health treatment in the region.<sup>10</sup> Another important contribution, though geographically limited in its scope, comes from the anthropologist Lawrence E. Fisher in his *Colonial Madness* (1985); Fisher explores the perceptions and treatments of mental health in Barbadian society and builds an argument for presenting madness as a cultural construct contributing to the maintenance of colonial legacy in the local

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<sup>8</sup> Mills's contribution to the investigation of colonial psychiatry is also remarkable. Among his articles are "Re-forming the Other: Treatment Regimes in the Lunatic Asylums of British India, 1857-1880" (1999); "The History of Modern Psychiatry in India, 1858-1947" (2001); "The Mad and the Past: Retrospective Diagnosis, Post-coloniality, Discourse Analysis and the Asylum Archive" (2000).

<sup>9</sup> Len Smith is currently conducting research on the history of mental health institutions in the Caribbean; however, his work on the subject is still in progress and unpublished.

<sup>10</sup> Later publications, such as Frederick W. Hickling, "Psychiatry in the Commonwealth Caribbean: a brief historical review" (1988) and Michael H. Beaubrun, "Caribbean psychiatry yesterday, today and tomorrow" (1992) fail to provide new historical data and are liable to the same omission.

social order (3). Interestingly, as Roland Littlewood points out, “Fisher has noted an extraordinary salience of the madman in West Indian calypsos, tales, gossip and literature, and comments that he offers an ironical, and ultimately hopeless, internalised image, one rooted in the identity which the White has ascribed to the Black, the epitome of worthlessness” (Littlewood, *Pathology and Identity* 39). Yet, given the ethnic composition of Barbados, Fisher has no opportunity of dealing with mental health in relation to the Indian experience. Indian indentureship was never implemented in the island; as stated in the *Report of the High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora* (2000), “[t]he first Indians to arrive in Barbados were a small group of silk merchants from Bengal in the year 1913. Almost all of them left around 1925. The present-day Indians in this island began arriving there in small numbers from 1929. They now constitute less than 1 per cent of the total population of 260,000” (231). More recently, as a result of a collaborative project between the University of West Indies and the World Psychiatric Association, Frederick W. Hickling and Eliot Sorel have published a volume entitled *Images of Psychiatry: the Caribbean* (2005); despite its potential, and its declared intention to discuss the development of psychiatric practices across the British West Indies, this study remains mainly focused on Jamaica and dedicates very limited space to other areas in the region. Besides, Hickling’s argument for the deinstitutionalization of mental health treatment, based on the idea that custodial psychiatry is simply a continuation of white-conceived forms of oppression rooted in the delusion of black inferiority, remains focused on the dynamics affecting the psychological development of slave societies, without taking into account other forms of oppression, such as Indentureship, which have negatively impacted the psychology of non-African sections of the Caribbean population.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Unlike Barbados, where the East Indian presence is very exiguous, Jamaica has a population of about

Alongside official colonial institutions for the care of mental health, alternative forms of treatment developed among Caribbean communities during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; some of these have attracted the attention of anthropologist Roland Littlewood, who in his essay “Madness, Vice and Tabanka” extensively explores popular knowledge of psychopathology among Afro-Caribbeans in Trinidad and offers a thorough investigation of the local understanding and treatment of madness outside the grounds of the colonial asylum. Moving on to Guyana, in “Dispensers, Obeah and Quackery: Medical Rivalries in Post-Slavery British Guiana”, Juanita de Barros makes some interesting observations regarding the role of medical assistants and obeah practitioners in Guyanese colonial society, again with a focus on the African section of the population; although de Barros does not deal specifically with the treatment of mental health, the unconventional therapeutical figures which are the object of her study extended their activity to the care of mental, as well as physical, illnesses.

Similarly, among Indo-Caribbean communities traditional healing practices continued to exist alongside official colonial provisions for mental health care. As Sudhir Kakar observes in *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors*, “Indians have long been involved in constructing explanatory systems for psychic distress and evolving techniques for its alleviation”; therefore, the variety of healing traditions in India is quite astonishing (3). Although only a fraction of the popular and religious beliefs relating to the healing of the psyche survived the crossing of the *kala pani*, their influence continued to be strong. In particular, the healing rituals connected to the worship of the goddess Kali have occupied an important role among the Indo-

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60,000 people of Indian origin. The *Report of the High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora* (2000) states that “Indian indentured labourers were recruited for work in the sugar plantations of Jamaica after the abolition of slavery in 1834. It is estimated that no fewer than 38,959 Indians were taken to this country between 1845 and 1917” (237).

Caribbean population in Guyana. In 1976, the collaboration between a psychiatrist, a healer and an anthropologist produced a fascinating study, entitled “Learning of Psychodynamics, History, and Diagnosis Management Therapy by a Kali Cult Indigenous Healer in Guiana”, which describes the process of adjustment of a Kali cult healer in Guiana and illustrates the process of incorporation of modern psychodynamics in his relations with mentally disturbed patients (Singer, Araneta, and Naidoo). At the same time, the study shows how the healer’s experience and knowledge of traditional culture can be valuable in developing a more effective culturally oriented psychotherapy.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst highly significant, these works have only scratched the surface of the rich history of colonial psychiatry in the Caribbean and none of them deals specifically with the triangular relationship involving colonialism, madness and indentureship, or with the impact of colonial psychiatry on the Indo-Caribbean population.

### **Literature and madness**

This gap in the history of colonial psychiatry corresponds to a lack of extensive scholarship investigating the issue of madness in Indo-Caribbean literature. The intriguing relationship between madness and western literature has attracted significant attention; for decades writers, critics and philosophers have approached it from different angles and the scholarship they have produced is so broad that it would be impossible to list it here. A few works, however, stand out for their theoretical impact. Shoshana Felman’s renowned book on *Writing and Madness* presents

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<sup>12</sup> For a thorough exploration of the cultural and spiritual aspects of the Kali rituals and its influence on diasporic literature see Stephanos Stephanides, *Translating Kali’s Feast. The Goddess in Indo-Caribbean Ritual and Fiction* (2000). Stephanides’s interdisciplinary study of the goddess bridges the gap between ethnography and literature through the theorization of Kali as a site of translation, common both to ritual performance and to narrative.

literature as the necessary meeting space between madness and reason. Focusing on the interplay of literature, philosophy and psychoanalysis, Felman draws on the Foucauldian claim that “throughout our cultural history, the madness that has been socially, politically and philosophically repressed has nonetheless made itself heard, has survived as a speaking *subject* only in and through literary texts” (Felman, *Writing* 15). A different approach is taken by Allen Thiher, who in *Revels in Madness* traces the development of the concept of madness and its representation in literature from ancient Greece to modern times. According to Thiher literary representations of madness have, in time, reflected different cultural assumptions; yet, unlike Foucault, who concentrates on the discontinuities that characterize intellectual history, Thiher argues for historical continuity in the ways of speaking about madness (6). Last but not least, Lillian Feder’s *Madness in Literature* examines representations of madness in literature in relation to society; besides discussing mad characters in literature, Feder looks at writers for whom “madness is a vehicle of self-revelation” (xi) and reads their literature as “explorations of the deranged mind” (xii), as a reflection of “human ambivalence towards the mind itself” (4).

Predictably, given the theoretical impact of Fanon’s writings, the investigation of madness in literature has entered the field of post-colonial literary criticism mainly through the door of francophone writing and, in the case of the Caribbean, it has focused mainly on Afro-Caribbean and Creole literature.<sup>13</sup> In particular, following the

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<sup>13</sup> In the field of Afro-Caribbean and Creole literature written in English, Jean Rhys’s attempt to recuperate Charlotte Brönte’s madwoman from the prison of the attic in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, (1966), Merle Hodge’s *Crick Crack Monkey* (1970), Erna Brodber’s *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980), Zee Edgell’s *Beka Lamb* (1982), Paul Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze’s “Riddym Ravings (The Mad Woman’s Poem)” (1992) and Olive Senior’s short story “You Think I Mad, Miss?” (1995) are just a small sample of works which share this distinctive representation of female sensibility. In his reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and other novels by “White West Indians” Kenneth Ramchand shifts the attention to the connection between the socio-political context of decolonisation and the “heightened states of consciousness” and *malaise* affecting the coloniser and his descendants. More specifically, he draws on Fanon’s views on decolonisation and uses the phrase “‘terrified consciousness’ to suggest the White minority’s sensation of shock and

plethora of works examining the subject of women's madness in western literature and society, special recognition and attention have been given to the issue of madness in relation to Caribbean women's writing and experience.<sup>14</sup> In the introduction to their anthology of women's narrative in the Caribbean, Pamela Mordecai and Betty Wilson notice "an early and persistent preoccupation with madness – 'la folie antillaise' – on the part of Caribbean women writers" (xii)<sup>15</sup>, and Evelyn O'Callaghan, who has looked specifically at representations of the madwoman in Caribbean literature, argues that "the image of the 'mad' woman, the ultimate victim, serves as a social metaphor for the damaged west Indian psyche" ("Interior Schisms Dramatized" 104).<sup>16</sup> Marie-Denise Shelton identifies a similar pattern in the writing of French-speaking Caribbean women, expressed through the creation of characters whose sense of self is severely compromised and who resort to madness and suicide to escape the "existential disease of belonging nowhere, of being deprived of identity" (351); likewise, Valérie Orlando has read francophone feminine works from Africa and the Caribbean to explore "the conjuncture of otherness, exile, and marginalization and how these states of being contribute to madness" (xii).

Yet, again, with a few notable exceptions, the importance of madness in the writing of Indo-Caribbean poets and novelists, both male and female, has been generally overlooked. Paula Morgan and Valerie Youssef's *Writing Rage* has been the

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disorientation as a massive and smouldering Black population is released into an awareness of its power" (225). At the same time, Ramchand argues for the universality of the "terrified consciousness" as a shared human heritage (236).

<sup>14</sup> In *Mind-forg'd Manacles* Roy Porter points to "an abundance of recent scholarship on women and madness in the nineteenth century" (IX). See in particular Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979); Phyllis Chesler's *Women and Madness* (1972); Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* (1985); Helen Small, "Madness as a Theme in Women's Literature" (1996); Denise Russell's *Women Madness and Medicine* (1995).

<sup>15</sup> Mordecai and Wilson refer in particular to Jane Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Wynter Carew's *Hills of Hebron*, Marion Patrick-Jones's *J'Ouvert Morning*, and Myriam Vieyra's *As the Sourcerer Said and Juletane* (xii).

<sup>16</sup> See also Evelyn O'Callaghan's *Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches To West Indian Fiction By Women*, Chapter 2.



first text to deal extensively with social and literary representations of trauma within Indo-Caribbean communities. Whilst focusing on the exploration of societal and family violence in a broad cross-section of Caribbean real-life and fictional discourses, Morgan and Youssef recognize the presence and the importance among Indo-Caribbean people of pathological forms of violence resulting from historical and environmental stressors. They dedicate an entire chapter to the gendered investigation of Indo-Caribbean family violence based on readings of Harold Ladoo's *No Pain Like This Body* and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, and explicitly locate the roots of family violence in "the psychic laceration of indentureship" (131). Ultimately, however, their work remains purposely focused on the issue of violence rather than on madness. Similarly, Brinda Mehta pays only passing attention to the discourse of madness in her investigation of Indo-Caribbean women's writing; in particular Mehta refers to madness in the works of Mahadai Das as "a metaphor for female cultural and intellectual exile, a sign of protest and rejection of conventionally defined female roles and expectations, reflecting the desire to transgress the limitations imposed by such forms of exile on women" (166). The most significant contribution to the exploration of fictional representations of madness in Indo-diasporic female writing can be found in Véronique Bragard's forthcoming book *Voyages into Coolitude: Kala Pani Women's Cross-Cultural Memory*, which analyses literary texts written both in French and English by women descendants of indentured labourers scattered across the world. Madness, argues Bragard, is culturally, historically and socially defined and in the context of migration it can be associated with identity crisis and exile (173); at the same time, her readings of Ananda Devi and Shani Mootoo emphasize the importance of madness in Indian women's writing as a site of escape and resistance to patriarchal oppression and violence.

## **Outline of the thesis**

Although these works offer a preliminary insight into the problematic relationship between literature and insanity, they leave one fundamental question still virtually unanswered: what compels madness to make its frequent appearance in Indo-Caribbean literature? Whilst recognizing that there is no easy or unique answer to this question, this project suggests that Indo-Caribbean literary representations of madness are fundamentally rooted in the memory of traumatic historical experiences of uprooting and indentureship; madness has entered the collective imaginary of Indo-Caribbean people as a result of the violence and displacement suffered by the early waves of indentured labourers whose painful psychological legacy has been both consciously and unconsciously passed on from generation to generation and immortalised into literature.

In order to substantiate this statement and to account for the impact of madness on the imaginary of Indo-Caribbean people, chapter one argues for the significance of psychological disorders as part of the indentureship experience itself and discusses new historical evidence which supports the claim of a high incidence of mental illness among East Indians in British Guiana during the nineteenth century. The critical reading of Dr Robert Grieve's *The Asylum Journal* exposes a twofold dialectic that problematically oscillates between the articulation of Fanonian and Foucauldian ideas, or, in other words, between insanity as a product of violent social and racial oppression under colonial rule, and the asylum as a place designed to morally control irregular and unmanageable behaviour that was instrumentally labelled as insane. Whilst overtly humanitarian, Grieve's therapeutic programmes were ultimately aimed

at transforming the behaviour of the asylum inmates in order to produce obedient and productive subjects.

Yet, how did madness enact its passage from history to literature? The radical barrister Edward Jenkins was the first one to present Indian indentured workers as the subject of literature and to pick up the theme of madness in relation to the coolies' experience of servitude. Although it fails altogether to discuss in depth the traumatic consequences of indentureship, Jenkins's narrative is not void of an embryonic attempt to describe the psychological shifts affecting those involved in the indenture system, and shows yet undeveloped intuitions of a causal connection between the coolies' experience of indentureship and madness.

The traumatic and painful events fictionalised by Jenkins in *Lutchmee and Dilloo* were to shape Indo-Caribbean collective memory and imaginary. Drawing on the theoretical framework offered by the sociologist and historian Gérard Bouchard for the articulation of a people's imaginary, chapter two argues that the kernel of Indo-Caribbean collective imaginary is a sense of physical and psychological fragmentation rooted in the experiences of migration and indentureship. As proven by Grieve's *Journal*, within the context of indentureship madness was a strong and significant presence; it was an important constituent of the indentured servants' daily experience and, as such, it became part of the shared, or collective, imaginary of Indo-Caribbean people. The psychological and symbolic impact of indentureship, and of the madness related to that experience, was not limited to the generations who endured this "new system of slavery".<sup>17</sup> For later generations indentureship has become the object of what the psychiatrist Vamik D. Volkan has named "chosen

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<sup>17</sup> *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920* is the poignant title chosen by the Caribbean historian Hugh Tinker for his well-researched study on Indian indentureship. Similarly, Cheddi Jagan opens his essay on "Indo-Caribbean Political Leadership" with the affirmation that: "Indentureship was slavery in another guise" (15).

trauma”, i.e. “the mental representation of an event that has caused a large group to face drastic losses, feel helpless and victimized by another group, and share a humiliating injury” (8).<sup>18</sup> Unsurprisingly, those authors who have aimed at reviving in their narrative the life of early immigrants have found it inevitable to deal with the theme of insanity. Adopting an approach that privileges a theme-based chronology this project starts its investigation of Indo-Caribbean literature with a reading of Mohammed Sharlow’s *The Promise* (1995) and David Dabydeen’s *The Counting House* (1996), the only two works to date to have recreated the life of early indentured workers respectively in British Guiana and in Trinidad. Both novels show a distinctive concern with the trope of madness.

Looking deeper into representations of insanity in male-written Indo-Caribbean narratives chapter three focuses on the analysis of two very different novels, namely Harold Sonny Ladoo’s *No Pain like this Body* (1972) and Shiva Naipaul’s *The Chip-Chip Gatherers* (1973), which reproduce the experience of East Indians in Trinidad respectively before and after the end of indentureship in 1917. These works chronologically introduce the figure of the mad-woman in Indo-Caribbean literature and develop this theme from divergent, yet complementary, perspectives which anticipate in fictional form the dual trap of womanhood in paternalistic societies theorised by Jane Ussher in her *Women and Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness* (1991). Ladoo’s first and most prominent novel suggests that women’s madness can result from compliance to traditional gender-based normative roles and from the acceptance of violence as a dominating factor in the regulation of male-female

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<sup>18</sup> Volkan observes that “some have taken exception to the term “chosen” trauma since a group does not consciously choose to be victimized or suffer humiliation”. Yet, he argues that “like an individual, a large group can be said to make unconscious “choices”. Thus the term “chosen trauma” accurately reflects a large group’s *unconscious* “choice” to add a past generation’s mental illustration of a particular event to its own identity. While large groups may have experienced any number of traumas in their history, only certain ones remain alive over many years (7).

relations. Antithetical to Ladoo's demonstration of the madwoman's experience is Shiva Naipaul's use of the stereotype of female insanity to invalidate the quest for individuality of his fictional women; the author's narrative choices demonstrate how madness is politically ascribed to women when they try to distance themselves from conventional roles.

Chapter four takes further the investigation of the highly problematic, yet omnipresent, conjunction of madness and femininity and shifts the focus from male to female writing. The chapter opens with an overview of the historical and social experience of Indian women in the Caribbean, which is essential to the appreciation of the issues raised in their recently emerging literary production. Ample space is dedicated in this chapter to the relation between Indo-Caribbean women and writing and to the struggle for identity articulated by Indian women within the suffocating space of patriarchal culture; this is done in order to contextualise the cry for the liberation of women's individuality from the cage of crystallized definitions and roles that dominates their writing. The pursuit of creativity exemplifies in many cases the battle of female individuals for independence and recognition in a world that denies women control over the semantic space. The creative process is therefore fuelled by women's need to overcome oppression and repression.<sup>19</sup> Phyllis Chesler and Luce Irigaray provide the main theoretical background for our understanding of Indo-Caribbean female writing.<sup>20</sup> Chesler's book *Women and Madness*, published in 1972,

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<sup>19</sup> The main paradox underlying this claim for creativity is that in popular imagination creativity is often associated with madness.

<sup>20</sup> For a critical reading of the works of Chesler and Irigaray in relation to the investigation of the concept of madness see Denise Russell, *Women, Madness and Medicine* (1995). In her theoretical study on women and madness Russell observes how very few feminist theorists have looked at this binomial connection from a philosophical rather than psychological perspective. As a result the attention has been focused on women's minds and on the psychological techniques that could influence them, while the concept of madness itself and the exploration of this category have remained largely neglected. Russell identifies in the works of Phyllis Chesler and Luce Irigaray, both well known for their critique of the male-centered and patriarchal bias of psychoanalysis, a valuable exception to this tendency.

is still the most comprehensive account on the subject. Chesler asserts that madness is to be understood in relation to the sexual determination of roles inherent in modern societies. Both in men and women madness is related to the devaluation of the female role as dependent, passive and submitted and it is therefore the result of a fundamental *oppression*.<sup>21</sup> Lack of power, however, is only one aspect of the problem. Luce Irigaray's argumentations on the *repression* of women's sexuality, identity and language in patriarchal societies provide fertile ground for further speculations on madness.<sup>22</sup> The poetry of Mahadai Das, the eclectic production of Ramabai Espinet and the intense prose of Shani Mootoo articulate, though in different ways, this dialectic of oppression and repression and provide here the fabric for our reading of Indo-Caribbean female experiences of madness. Their investigation of female insanity adopts multiple perspectives and confirms the centrality of this issue not only as a privileged literary trope or as a collective allegory, but also as the translation and transcription of both historically inherited and personal experiences of fragmentation.

Chapter five exposes, instead, male madness through the lenses of female writers and shows how Jan Shinebourne and Marina Budhos link the experience of the Indo-Caribbean man/intellectual seeking education abroad to the exploration of the trope of madness. In both cases, madness is triggered by the male protagonists' social and cultural displacement, by the difficulty of adapting to an idealised English reality, and by the anxiety to survive and compete in an alien world.

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<sup>21</sup> Chesler also tries to establish a distinction between false and real madness. She argues that when women's roles are pushed to the extreme, this results in forms of depression, anxiety paranoia, etc., which are not real madness, but simply the result of a profound unhappiness with one's role. What constitutes madness instead is the alienation from one's role which ultimately results in some sort of schizophrenia.

<sup>22</sup> In *This Sex which is not One* Irigaray sustains that identity is strongly connected to sexuality and that in patriarchal cultures women's sexuality has been conceptualised in male terms. In Freud's theory on the course of female sexual development Irigaray identifies elements which define women as inferior to men, as "lacking" subjects. According to Freud the normal evolution of female sexuality is composed of two stages, the first focused on the clitoris and the second on the vagina. The confinement of women's eroticism to the vagina, a cavity which is out of sight and therefore invisible, is seen by Irigaray as an inadequate imposition of masculine parameters in the definition of femininity.

A similar tension appears to mark the personal experience of V.S. Naipaul, whose artistic journey begun as a psychologically tormented young Indo-Trinidadian scholar at Oxford and culminated in the winning of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001. Madness is an obsessively recurrent and complex theme in V.S. Naipaul's writing, a complex legacy linked on one hand to the exploration of familial and personal backgrounds and on the other to the development of a wider colonial discourse. The three selected for discussion in the final chapter of this project mark the progression in V.S. Naipaul's writing from a removed and parodic representation of madness to a more personal and introspective account of psychological displacement, whilst conveying the artist's struggle to dominate chaos through the disciplined act of writing.